

Testimony to the New Jersey Department of Education  
February 20, 2008

Good afternoon. I am Kathleen Witcher, member of Our Children/ Our Schools campaign and the statewide Education Committee of NJ NAACP and a retired educator having spent more than three decades in the classroom.

I would like to thank Commissioner Doolan and others for their diligence in this effort and recognize the Education Law Center's efforts with SRA: Loophole or Lifeline?.

My recent classroom experience was involved in scoring as well as a portion of working with senior high school students on the Special Review Assessment. When there were performance assessment tasks or PATs to be scored, I was one of three teachers in one group using rubrics to score the tasks prior to them being sent to the County Education Office for approval. After having been a scorer, I became a teacher who explained to my family that I must go to school in the dark of the early morning for the classes that began at 7:30 AM with half of the students attending Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday classes for forty minutes and then the remaining half on Thursday and Fridays.. The time and diligence it took was well worth it because the seniors had between four and eight tasks that they completed with great focus and a common goal of earning a high school diploma, a passport to their futures.

Today I represent those students many of whom attend Essex County College, Bloomfield College and William Paterson pursuing high education degrees.

And, yes, they completed rigorous work with multiple steps requiring that they demonstrate a mastery of concepts covering geometric formulae, sequencing, ratio and proportion, linear graphing, three-dimensional construction, coordinate grids, as well as algebraic functions.

Contrary to the groups who oppose the SRA Special Review Assessment process I must report that SRA is certainly not an eighth grade test; not a test at all. A read of the June 13, 2007 LEXINGTON INSTITUTE newsletter is a possible example of how those not immersed in the pedagogy have mislabeled SRA as a portfolio assessment. Robert Holland indicates that Kentucky and Vermont experienced problems with portfolios that replaced standardized testing for students in Grades 3 to 8. Valerie Smith of the federal Department of Education describes this as an SRA process. However, it must be reported that more than twenty five years ago the New Jersey Department of Education adopted the Minimum Basic Skills Test which tested elementary skills, but proceeded vigorously to this point where the Core Curriculum Standards for English and Mathematics for Grade 11 are reflected in the High School Proficiency Assessment and also in the SRA performance tasks. Portfolios once used in New Jersey's high schools have long been abandoned. Today's students in the eleventh and twelfth grades are tested on concepts taught in Algebra I, Algebra II and Geometry along with fundamentals of Pre Calculus and Trigonometry. This dismisses the argument that opponents of the SRA have made when they mistakenly speak of students being given rather than earning their high school diplomas by way of the Special Review Assessment or SRA.

I should ask that the New Jersey State Department of Education question the documentation of the opponents who seek to disrupt the SRA process. Have they involved educators in their examination of the process? And to what degree can they show that the process does not represent a demonstration of mastery of concepts of the Core standards?

I urge the continuation of the High School Alternative Assessment process that allows those students who do not pass the HSPA in their junior and the fall of their senior high school years to complete the process. I am concerned that the more than thirteen thousand youth affected, statewide, both in and out of areas of concentrated poverty, continue to meet the goal of earning a high school diploma.

I repeat a message given by several former students who had heard that there might be no SRA for them this year. They said, "then, I'll just drop out, then". I implore you in the names of these students to pass the plan. And further I ask that you ensure the accuracy of the scoring by rubric as already proposed in this plan where teachers will train the scorers of the students' work. When students are allowed to complete their goals this to me is the promise of thorough and efficient education.

KW